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Liveable Villages

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Liveable villages: the relationship between volunteering and liveability in the perceptions of rural residents

Abstract

In the Dutch policy discourse it is increasingly thought that active citizenship will positively affect satisfaction with the living environment. This paper challenges this assumption by examining whether and how volunteering in village life and individual perceptions of liveability are interrelated. Through a series of hierarchical regressions, we found that having the opportunity to volunteer in village life is not a significant predictor of perceived liveability. Moreover, by classifying rural inhabitants as non-participants, nominal participants and active participants in volunteering in village life, we determined that active residents evaluate liveability less positively than the other two groups. Accordingly, determinants other than volunteering and active citizenship are better able to predict perceived liveability, although the specific variables differ for each group of rural inhabitants. This suggests that governments overestimate both the willingness of rural residents to volunteer and the benefits of becoming active in village life.

Keywords: Liveability; Volunteering; Citizen activity; Big society; Quantitative approach

1. Introduction

Life in European villages is strongly influenced by the demographic processes of ageing, population decline and the outmigration of the highly educated. These processes raise concerns among residents and policymakers that a good quality of life in rural areas is not guaranteed. In Dutch policy discourse the concept of liveability is frequently used to estimate how individuals value the quality of their living environment and which determinants play a role therein (Veenhoven, 2000; Kaal, 2011; Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). Policymakers often assume that the liveability of a village is determined to a great extent by active citizenship (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2007/2011; Leidelmeijer, 2012). It is thought that active citizenship generates possibilities for the accumulation of social capital and leads to higher levels of social cohesion, which will in turn be beneficial to the village in a myriad of ways. This line of reasoning is further motivated by the introduction of the ‘big society’ (or the Dutch equivalent, ‘participation society’), which involves the reallocation of responsibilities from the central state to local communities (Kisby, 2010; Patty & Johnston, 2011; Putters, 2014). At the local level, this is translated into the promotion of a culture of volunteering, self-reliance and community initiatives to replace the popular belief that the government should be held responsible for the development and quality of local public space and local society. To achieve this, policymakers increasingly expect that rural citizens are committed to their living environment and would willingly participate in various aspects of village life on a voluntary basis to keep their village liveable (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013; Mohan, 2012; Woolvin & Hardill, 2013; Jones & Heley, 2014).

Although no conclusive definition of liveability can be found in the literature, it is commonly agreed to entail the degree to which the physical and the social living environments fit the individual requirements and desires (Leidelmeijer et al., 2008; Pacione, 1990; Newman, 1999). In the urban planning literature, liveability is often used as a proxy for citizen activity and focuses on place-making processes (Kaal, 2011; Godschalk, 2004). It is believed that urban residents should collaborate within local communities to be better able to direct place-making processes and hence to safeguard the quality of the living environment against neoliberal and economic growth-related policies (Douglass,

2002; Wagner & Caves, 2012). Regarding rural areas, the idea remains persistent that villages consist of inhabitants living together in *Gemeenschappen* with high levels of mutual support and a strong sense of local society. Such close-knit communities are considered to be very suitable for dealing with the 'big society'-related redistribution of responsibilities from the central state to local communities. However, increasingly it is found that, due to processes of globalisation and increased mobility, rural residents perceive the local community as less important and attach greater value to other aspects of village life, such as the opportunity to live in a green and quiet environment (Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2013). This implies that rural residents' commitment to the local community is waning (Groot, 1989; Wellman & Leighton, 1979) and that the default position in which community members work together to make change happen may have become outdated (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013).

Moreover, many scholars are sceptical about the added value of 'participation' as a buzz word in policymaking in general and as a driver of liveability in particular (Shortall, 2008; Jancovich, 2015; Tonts, 2005; Fiorina, 1999). In the voluntarism literature, the unproblematised assumption that volunteering is a 'good thing' has been challenged (Joseph & Skinner, 2012). Studies discussing the benefits of volunteering in rural areas are beginning to shed light on some of the less positive elements of voluntarism, such as 'volunteer burn-out', 'no-choice volunteering' and volunteering being exclusive or inaccessible to some groups in a community (Timbrell, 2007; Woolvin & Rutherford, 2013). If the critics are right, this could mean that governments are overestimating both the willingness of rural residents to volunteer and the benefits of becoming active in village life.

Against this background it is remarkable how little attention is paid to the question of whether and how liveability and active citizenship in terms of formal voluntary work are interrelated in rural residents' perceptions. This study therefore aims to explore whether high volunteerism rates do actually lead to higher levels of perceived liveability. We will also investigate whether rural residents perceive the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life as a determinant of liveability, and its importance relative to other liveability determinants such the availability of services and public transport. We do so by conducting a series of hierarchical regression analyses, based on data collected in rural areas in the province of Friesland, the Netherlands. This paper starts with a discussion of how the concept of liveability has been applied in geographical research and how it could relate to active citizenship. We then discuss the potential positive and negative effects of volunteering in rural societies, and we explore whether different groups of active rural residents can be identified. The quantitative method is further detailed in the methodology section, followed by our results and the discussion.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1. Liveability and citizen activity

Liveability is an emerging theme in the field of urban geography and planning (cf. Pacione, 2003; Howley et al., 2009; Ruth & Franklin, 2014; Abbott et al., 2008; Gough, 2015; Lowe et al., 2014) and a well-established concept in Dutch policymaking and rural planning (Kaal, 2011; Leidelmeijer & Van Kamp, 2004; Thissen & Loopmans, 2013). In a geographical context, liveability usually refers to the degree to which the physical and the social living environment fit individual requirements and desires (Leidelmeijer et al., 2008). The concept of liveability slightly differs from the concept of quality of life (Van Kamp et al., 2003). Quality of life usually refers to the subjective social wellbeing of individuals and is underpinned by several dimensions which relate to self-reported measurements such as happiness, life satisfaction and a sense of belonging (Shucksmith et al., 2009). In contrast to quality of

life, the concept of liveability is concerned with an individual's appraisal of the qualities of the neighbourhood or the village community. This spatial dimension is normally not incorporated in quality of life models, whilst geographers have argued that it should be considered as one of the pillars of quality of life (Van Kamp et al., 2003; Wang & Wang, 2016; Ruth & Franklin, 2014). Scholars report theoretical (Veenhoven, 2014; Marans, 2001; Fleuret & Atkinson, 2007) and empirical (Schwanen & Wang, 2014; Morrison, 2011) support for the idea that social and physical aspects of place play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of life in a village. Therefore, we argue that liveability provides a promising pathway to explore further how rural residents evaluate the quality of their living environments.

For a long time, village liveability was associated with the maintenance of services and facilities. More recently, research has indicated that the availability of various kinds of public services has less impact on quality of life than commonly assumed (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Gardenier, 2010) and people's satisfaction with services is better understood in terms of accessibility rather than availability (Langford & Higgs, 2010; Haartsen & Van Wissen, 2012; Elshof et al., 2015). Accordingly, attention is now shifting to maintaining facilities where people can meet and interact with each other, such as community centres, as the presence of such venues is believed to be vital to enhancing communities' social cohesion. So far, there is limited empirical support for an individual's subjective evaluation of liveability being affected by participation in community life. Bernard (2015) reports a positive relationship between participation in events and a positive evaluation of the environment. He assumes that community involvement fosters a positive attitude towards the community in general. This could also lead to a positive evaluation of other community characteristics, not necessarily directly related to participation in community life.

The arguments governments use to promote 'big society' are usually framed in terms of 'empowerment' or 'responsibility': active citizens are expected to take personal responsibility for the liveability of their living environment and government policies aim to encourage this by emphasising people's sense of citizenship (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). The idea is that through societal, leisure and political participation, 'big society' provides rural residents with ample opportunities to influence local policymaking processes, collectively to reform local society in alignment with their own local desires and to seek new and innovative ways to deliver better local services at lower costs. In turn, such communal activities are believed to encourage processes of social cohesion and social capital enhancement.

2.2. The shadow side of volunteering

Governments in many Western countries are cutting back on the work they do and participation in this context can be identified as a communities' capacity to safeguard residents' needs and desires (Joseph & Skinner, 2012). It is believed that individual rural communities are capable of successfully filling the gaps left by former state-organised services based on the assumption that they have a strong sense of self-sufficiency and social solidarity. It is assumed that 'big society' initiatives offer rural communities possibilities to experiment with the reform of services which best fit their local needs and desires (Williams, 2002; Williams et al., 2014). However, empirical studies show that reliance on voluntary efforts has many limitations and shortcomings (Crisp, 2015), particularly with geographically dispersed populations, for which providing an adequate level of voluntary-based services is a continuous challenge (Hardill & Dwyer, 2011). Geographical and socioeconomic limitations hinder the substitutional value of voluntary work in the reform of public services,

meaning that 'some rural places will thrive through voluntarism while others wither away' (Skinner, 2008; p. 201).

Due to the rapidly changing composition of rural populations, the distribution of voluntary organisations in rural areas is uneven and dispersed (Mohan, 2012; Milligan, 2007). Some form of attachment to local society is often regarded as a prerequisite for becoming active in village life (Musick & Wilson, 2008), yet the commitment of most rural residents towards their community has decreased over the years (Hunter & Suttles, 1972; Groot, 1989; Vermeij, 2015). Research indicates for instance that in-migrants are less actively involved in a village's social life compared to long-term residents and that they are especially underrepresented in events and activities connected with enhancing a village's social qualities (Vermeij, 2015). This could be because community life has a local character, with newcomers often being regionally orientated and involved in social networks far beyond the village borders (Simon et al., 2007; Lammerts & Doğan, 2004). However, long-term residents can also be involved in social networks beyond the village borders (Vermeij, 2015) and may therefore be less motivated to become active in village life.

As a consequence, the assumption that volunteering is unequivocally positive has been critically scrutinised (Timbrell, 2007). First, the willingness to participate in village social life is in many cases a lifestyle decision (Nakano, 2000; Holmes, 2014), suggesting that residents who choose to volunteer 'are typically degree educated, middle aged and of higher social class' (Morgan, 2013; p. 384). Voluntary organisations can therefore have a very exclusive character by only being accessible to particular groups in a community. More affluent volunteers tend to use voluntary work as a tool to strengthen their social networks. This suggests that higher-income groups benefit most from opportunities to set up various community self-help groups (Williams, 2002; Shucksmith, 2000). Second, in rural areas facing depopulation, the number of voluntary tasks which need to be discharged by a reduced number of residents can be overwhelming (Tonts, 2005). In some cases, volunteers are running services which would otherwise not exist. This is often referred to as 'no-choice' volunteerism and is required when there are no alternative means of providing a specific service important to the local community (Timbrell, 2007). Third, governments and market actors do not always collaborate effectively with volunteers in running civic initiatives and can even delay or frustrate a project's progress. This can cause volunteers to feel that they are losing their voice in and ownership of an activity, which can eventually result in volunteer 'burnout' (Salemink & Strijker, 2016; Allen & Mueller, 2013).

2.3. Different types of active residents

Aiming to gain a better grasp of the role of participation in the ways rural residents appreciate the quality of their living environment, this study classifies rural residents according to their level of participation in village life. Volunteering in formal organisations will be used as a proxy to measure participation levels in village life. The motivations to volunteer in village life and the experiences while volunteering 'are numerous, hugely diverse and vary according to personal, cultural environmental and structural circumstances' (Brodie et al., 2009; p. 27). There are many different forms of volunteering and the benefits that volunteers report tend to vary considerably (Wilson, 2012; Musick & Wilson, 2008). In particular, when the tasks assigned to a volunteer match the volunteer's initial reasons for starting to volunteer, high levels of satisfaction with the voluntary job can be predicted (Wilson, 2012).

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to explore all the motives for starting to volunteer in depth, but it is acknowledged that residents who choose to volunteer can roughly be divided into

two types: nominal and active participants (Stern & Dillmann, 2006), both pertaining to different levels of local engagement. Nominal participation refers to a relatively uncommitted contribution to a local community, such as attending local events or signing petitions. Active participation refers to people who feel responsible for the overall success of the local community and invest a substantial amount of their spare time and effort in achieving this. However, this dichotomous classification implies that there is another group of rural residents, namely those who do not participate in village life. Rural residents are not equally motivated to become involved in a village's social life and some of them may have made a conscious decision not to participate in it as their attachment to their direct living environment can be very limited (Barcus & Brunn, 2010). Their interest and involvement in the village's social life may not go much deeper than having good relations with their immediate neighbours. Other groups may even lack the ability to participate equally in village life due to financial or physical constraints, suggesting that participation is socially patterned (Shortall, 2008; Baum et al., 2000). We should therefore take into account that a considerable number of rural residents choose not to participate in village life (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Based on our literature review, we distinguish three types of voluntary participants in this paper: active, nominal and non-participants.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

We adopted a quantitative approach to clarifying the relationship between volunteering and liveability in the perceptions of rural residents. By means of hierarchical regression analyses we will first determine whether rural residents perceive the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village life as a determinant of liveability and how important this is relative to other liveability determinants. Second, we will examine whether different levels of volunteering lead to different perceptions of liveability from the perspective of individual village dwellers. The quantitative data we present in this paper were collected by means of an online survey conducted in rural areas in the province of Friesland (see Figure 1). Friesland is situated in the north of the Netherlands and is considered to be the most rural part of the country (Haartsen et al., 2003). Many ways of distinguishing urban areas from rural ones can be found in the literature (cf. Cromartie, 2008; Flora et al., 1992). However, in this study we chose to classify villages (including the surrounding area) with a total population of less than 5000 as 'rural'. This cut-off point has been used and discussed in previous studies (Phillimore & Reading, 1992; Perlín, 2010). In line with this definition, we calculated that the province of Friesland has 293,801 inhabitants living in rural communities out of a total population of 646,390 inhabitants (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). We administered an online survey to the *Fries burgerpanel* (Frisian citizens' panel) to recruit respondents for this study (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). This panel is hosted by the Frisian research institute Partoer and comprises people living in Friesland who have agreed to complete surveys on societal topics on a regular basis. Only panel members living in rural areas are included in the further data analysis for our study here.

Figure 1 around here

A convenience sampling approach yielded a total of 468 completed questionnaires of members of the citizens' panel living in rural areas. The questionnaire was online for several weeks in autumn 2014. Online survey research is believed to have significant benefits over other means of collecting survey data (Evans & Mathur, 2005). However, one of its main drawbacks is that survey

data collected using a panel are difficult to generalise to a larger population, as the panel is composed of self-selected respondents rather than being randomly selected from the general population. Respondents who enjoy expressing their opinion on regional matters in Friesland could therefore be overrepresented. We also found that respondents in our dataset were relatively old (average age 55.5) and better educated than the provincial average (State of Friesland, 2015). The underrepresentation of younger age cohorts and less well-educated residents suggests that the data is not a perfect representation of the total rural population living in the province of Friesland. Bearing these limitations in mind, non-probability samples are nevertheless well-suited to assessing how certain variables are statistically related to each other and to subsequently accepting or rejecting an associated null hypothesis (Steinmetz et al., 2014).

3.2. Variables

This study distinguishes four types of variable:

Overall perceived liveability – the dependent variable is the extent to which respondents perceive their daily living environment as liveable. As argued previously, liveability (or its Dutch translation, *leefbaarheid*) is a common term in Dutch everyday language and the inhabitants of Dutch rural areas are particularly familiar with its meaning. We therefore assessed the perceived quality of the living environment simply by asking respondents to grade the liveability of their living environment on a scale from one (lowest) to ten (highest). The results show that respondents perceive the liveability of their villages as very high, with an overall average score of 7.94 (see Table 2). This relatively high score reflects other studies which also show that rural residents living on the Dutch countryside are very satisfied with their living environment (Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2013).

Liveability determinants – the measurement of several liveability determinants is derived from the method as described by Namazi-Rad et al. (2012a, 2012b), who originally distinguished six relevant liveability determinants: Transport, Services, Job, Housing, Neighbourhood and Leisure. Each liveability determinant is composed of several items. The way some of the items are addressed was slightly altered in our survey as not all of them seemed relevant in a rural context. The items have also been translated into Dutch. The determinant ‘opportunities to volunteer’ has been added to the original approach because this is the core of our research and we believe that this determinant has not been stressed enough by Namazi-Rad et al. (2012b). The question ‘How satisfied are you with the opportunities to do voluntary work in your living environment?’ was added to cover the liveability determinant of volunteering. We asked respondents to state how satisfied they were with the liveability determinants on a 5-point Likert scale (from *very unsatisfied* to *very satisfied*). Respondents were then asked to rank the liveability determinants in their preferred order of importance, enabling us to assess the relative importance of several liveability determinants in general and of volunteering as a liveability determinant in particular.

The item ‘Home size’ was found to have the highest mean, while ‘costs of public transport’ has the lowest (Table 1). At the level of the liveability determinants, respondents were most satisfied with ‘house’ and least satisfied with ‘job’. The Cronbach’s alpha, indicating the internal reliability of the factors, shows acceptable reliabilities. Only the ‘transport’ factor scores below the conventional standard of .65 (Vaske, 2008). However, as the alpha is only slightly below this number and deleting any of the items from the transport determinant would not improve the overall alpha, we decided to leave all the items in.

Table 1 around here

Volunteering in village life – respondents were asked how much time they normally spend volunteering in various forms of community life, such as clubs (sport, music, theatre and other hobby clubs), religious organisations, societal organisations (school, nature, elderly healthcare and civil rights), politically-oriented organisations, and neighbourhood, municipal or village councils. By active involvement we mean the weekly number of hours an individual rural resident spends volunteering for local organisations, which can include, for example, organisational work, coaching a youth team, maintaining a website, collecting money for charity, visiting the elderly or organising church events. In line with Stern and Dillmann’s typology, we classified respondents either as non-participants (not spending any time in village associational life), nominal participants (volunteering to a maximum of 5 hours a week in village associational life) or active participants (volunteering more than 5 hours a week in village associational life). We explicitly asked respondents about their level of ‘formal volunteering’ rather than ‘informal volunteering’ or any less formalised activities (Williams, 2002). This means that it is possible that respondents, including those referred to as non-participants, are actually involved in community life in other ways than those captured by this research.

The results show that the non-participant category (N = 77) accounts for only 16.5 percent of the total number of respondents. Almost half of the respondents can be classed as nominal participants (N = 242) and approximately a third of the respondents can be referred to as active participants (N = 149) (Table 2). The respondents spend considerably more hours volunteering in village social life than the average participation rate of the total Dutch rural population would suggest (Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2013), although we must consider the overrepresentation of older age cohorts and more highly educated residents in the data. Furthermore, the three groups report different scores on overall perceived liveability: the active participants report the lowest perceived liveability scores while the non-participants report the highest perceived liveability scores.

Sociodemographic variables – a number of sociodemographic factors have been added to the survey as control variables that previous research has shown to be important to social participation. We included the variables education, length of residence, sex, home ownership and age. The association between this latter variable and any dependent variable is often assumed to be curvilinear. We therefore decided to use the squared form of age in the analysis. A number of interesting outcomes can be observed when these factors are combined with the residents’ activity categories (Table 2): active residents are more often male, better educated and reported a longer length of residence than the other two categories. Other studies of rural resident activity in village life report similar results, although there are differences depending on the type of social activity (cf. Brodie et al., 2009; Wandersman & Florin, 2000; Vermeij, 2015). We also included a classification of forms of activity to examine the kinds of activities different types of active citizens are involved in. The most notable observation is that nominal participants seem to be only marginally interested in becoming active in local politics and church events, while active participants can be found abundantly in each form of civic activity.

Table 2 around here

4. Results

4.1. Volunteering as a predictor of liveability

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the relative importance of the opportunities for volunteering as a predictor of perceived liveability, with blocks of independent measures introduced hierarchically into the model to assess the net increase in variance explained by each set of variables. The main advantage of this statistical technique is its ability to identify which liveability determinant contributes statistically significantly to explaining the dependent variable, after the effect of several demographic variables is controlled for (Pallant, 2013). A significant and positive standardised β -coefficient indicates that this specific determinant makes a unique positive contribution to explaining overall liveability. An increased value on the liveability determinant by one standard deviation would be likely to increase the overall perceived liveability score by the value of the corresponding standardised β . If the sign of the β coefficient is negative, the opposite effect is found. In that case, an increased value on the liveability determinant by one standard deviation results in a decrease in the overall perceived liveability score by the value of the corresponding standardised β . There were no indications that the assumption of multicollinearity has been violated, indicating that the statistical inferences made about the data are reliable.

The seven liveability determinants were introduced into the model first, followed by the sociodemographic variables (Table 3). The seven liveability determinants collectively account for 31 percent of the variance in the dependent variable (indicated by the R^2). The results show that satisfaction with the neighbourhood in particular is a strong predictor of individually perceived liveability, making the strongest unique contribution to the dependent variable. Satisfaction with leisure was found to be another important predictor of perceived liveability. In contrast to these significant predictors of perceived liveability, satisfaction with the opportunity to volunteer in a village's social life is not significantly related to perceived liveability. The standardised effect size (β) of this specific predictor is very small and highly insignificant.

Adding the second block of independent variables causes a very small increase in the R^2 to 33 percent ($p < .05$). In other words, only an additional two percent of the variance in overall liveability is accounted for by the sociodemographic variables. The item 'active in village life' is the only variable found to make a significant contribution to the dependent variable. This particular item indicates that rural residents who participate for more than five hours a week in village social life are more likely to grade the liveability in their villages somewhat lower than rural residents who do not spend any time in village social life. Satisfaction with opportunities to volunteer in village social life is thus not a significant predictor of perceived liveability, but the actual level of volunteering in village social life does have a significant and negative effect on the way liveability is perceived.

The insignificant relationship between satisfaction with opportunities to volunteer and perceived liveability concurs with the low importance respondents attribute to the opportunities to volunteer when asked to rank the determinants of liveability in order of importance (Figure 2). The availability of opportunities to volunteer is ranked here as the least important determinant. In general, the respondent's own house is considered to be the most important determinant followed by the neighbourhood and services. It is remarkable that house and services are ranked as two of the most important determinants, but that satisfaction with neither makes a significant contribution to overall perceived liveability. The opposite is true for neighbourhood: satisfaction with the neighbourhood does contribute significantly to perceived liveability and is also the second most important determinant of perceived liveability. What the two significant predictors of perceived liveability (neighbourhood and leisure) have in common is that it is difficult for an individual genuinely to influence their overall quality. The realisation of a safe and clean neighbourhood with a

sufficient number of leisure facilities can only be achieved if inhabitants act together. It is difficult for individuals to affect the quality of the neighbourhood and its leisure amenities, and it appears that exactly these determinants are positively related to perceived liveability. This is in contrast to a determinant such as the respondent's own house, which is in principle privately owned and can therefore be altered by its owners to best meet their desires and requirements.

Table 3 around here

Figure 2 around here

4.2. Level of participation and perceived liveability

The previous regression already revealed that the level of volunteering in village life correlates significantly with perceived liveability, yet different groups of residents may value different aspects of rural life differently. To explore this possibility we now present three hierarchical regression models for non-participants, nominal participants and active participants, with which we intend to answer the question whether active rural residents perceive liveability differently from less active rural residents and which determinants play a role in that. We performed the regression in two steps: first the seven determinants were added to the model, followed by the sociodemographic variables, to explore how the three categories differ from each other in terms of perceived liveability.

Satisfaction with the neighbourhood is the best predictor of a positive perception of liveability for all three groups (Table 4). In general, this is highly valued by all rural residents, but most strongly by the non-participant group. Furthermore, one unique and positive predictor of perceived liveability can be distinguished for the non-participant group, namely satisfaction with transport. This suggests that this specific group appraises the quality of place in terms of a pleasant, friendly and green environment complemented by affordable and well-organised modes of transportation. This group is somewhat less well educated than the other two groups and also reports the shortest period of residence. Unfortunately, the data does not allow us to differentiate further between residents who purposely chose not to participate and those who were unable to participate. Nevertheless, this group reports the highest level of perceived liveability, suggesting that they are the most satisfied with liveability in their villages.

An interesting additional outcome is that the beta coefficient for services correlates negatively with perceived liveability. This does not necessarily mean that the non-participant group is less satisfied with the provision of services in their villages, rather it indicates that the level of satisfaction does not make a positive contribution to their perceived level of liveability. The individual correlation coefficient between satisfaction with services and perceived liveability is positive and not significant ($r = .11$, $n = 77$, $p > .05$). The unique and negative correlation found in the regression model therefore only occurs when the other determinants are controlled for. The opposite is true for the other two groups: their individual correlation coefficients for the relationship between satisfaction with services and perceived liveability are positive and significant while in the hierarchical regression these positive relationships disappear when other determinants are controlled for (nominal participants: $r = .26$, $n = 242$, $p < .01$, active participants: $r = .44$, $n = 149$, $p < .01$). It makes sense that the active participants report the strongest correlation between satisfaction with services and perceived liveability as they report the longest length of residence. Research indicates that long-term residents have particularly positive and nostalgic sentiments towards the social and economic aspects of place (Zwiers et al., 2016). They seem to believe that the provision of

services makes their living environment more attractive for both current and potential future inhabitants, resulting in stability-orientated behaviour towards service provisions (Paddison & Calderwood, 2007; Amcoff et al., 2011).

The nominal participants differ from the other two groups by scoring positively on the liveability determinant 'leisure'. For them, being satisfied with an adequate supply of leisure facilities predicts high levels of perceived liveability. In other words, this group seems to prefer a less committed style of volunteering, as they do not spend many hours on formal volunteering. This contrasts with the most active participants, whose job satisfaction predicts high levels of perceived liveability. A possible explanation for this positive relationship could be that this group comprises relatively highly educated people for whom work is generally an important condition for life satisfaction and thus also for liveability (Andrews & Withney, 1976). Neighbourhood satisfaction is also the best predictor of perceived liveability for these two groups.

Introducing the second block of sociodemographic variables into the model did not result in a strong increase in the model's R^2 . The seven liveability determinants account for the largest proportion of the variation in perceived liveability. The only significant contributor in the second block is the homeownership variable in the active participant category. Active homeowners are more satisfied with overall liveability than renters in this specific category, most likely because they have better opportunities to actively maintain and modify their homes and because they are believed to have stronger bonds with their living environment than home renters (Wilson, 2012).

Table 4 around here

5. Discussion and concluding thoughts

Our primary objective in this paper was to explore the relationship between perceived liveability and participation in village life via volunteering. Based on data collected in rural areas in the province of Friesland, the Netherlands, we provide two additional arguments which call into question the validity of the prevailing policy assumption that higher rates of citizen activity lead to higher levels of perceived liveability. First, we found that the most active citizens are the least satisfied with the overall liveability of their villages and that non-participants report the highest value of liveability. This finding indicates that the non-participants are most satisfied with their direct living environment without being actively involved in any formal village organisation. At an individual level, active citizenship could contribute to life satisfaction and possibly to perceived quality of life (Hyypä & Mäki, 2003; Nummela et al., 2008; Perkins et al., 1996), however our results show that the perception of the quality of the living environment is not greatly affected by increased levels of participation. Second, the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village life does not correlate with perceived liveability. Although the majority of the respondents are at some level active in village life, having ample opportunities to do voluntary work does not appear to be an important indicator for a liveable environment. Therefore, this paper's results suggest that the availability of opportunities to volunteer in village social life is not an important determinant of perceived liveability and that satisfaction with opportunities to volunteer is not a significant predictor of perceived liveability.

Consequently, determinants other than the availability of options to do voluntary work predict high levels of liveability. After distinguishing three groups of rural residents based on their level of volunteering in village life, we found that satisfaction with the neighbourhood turned out to be the best predictor for each group of perceived liveability. However, differences between the

groups indicated transport to be an important predictor of liveability for non-participants, whereas leisure was more important for nominal participants and jobs for active participants. It is important that policymakers become aware that villages comprise diverse groups of residents and that the voices of residents who are less visible in village social life are also heard. Non-participants' ideas of what comprises a liveable village may differ considerably from active residents who are more likely to set up civic initiatives and to attend public consultation meetings. In reality, the non-participant group can even be expected to be larger than indicated by the results of this study. Active residents are normally more inclined to join online panels and to share their opinion about various societal topics than non-participants would do.

The active rural resident group is remarkable in that they are very involved in village social life and invest a significant amount of their spare time in furthering the overall success of their village. This group of active citizens could therefore experience feelings of disappointment when they realise that other residents are not as motivated to participate in the village's social life as they are. They may also become more aware of the need to improve local deficiencies and slowly turn from being active participants into critical participants (Timbrell, 2007). Some active citizens may perhaps only be participating out of necessity as 'if I don't do it, nobody else will' (Oliver, 1984; p. 602). Bearing in mind that the group of active participants are least satisfied with the quality of their living environment, it would be interesting to inquire further into what motivates this specific group to volunteer: idealism, dissatisfaction or because they feel they have no choice? Through qualitative research, more insight into the motives and the lived experiences of doing actual voluntary work can be collected. A clearer picture can thus be obtained of the position of volunteering in rural life in an era of state rollback. Critical engagement with voluntary work in rural areas is necessary, as it seems difficult to reconcile the renewed policy focus on localism and community participation with a rural population which becomes increasingly diverse, outwardly orientated and less committed to local society.

All in all, scholars are drawing increasing attention to the negative side effects of promoting voluntarism as a key driver for sustainable rural communities (cf. Jones & Heley, 2014; Woolvin & Hardill, 2013; Shucksmith, 2000). Taking the spatial dimensions of welfare into account, the capacity to self-organise is unevenly distributed across areas (Hamnett, 2009; Uitermark, 2015). Rural communities which are rich either in social or cultural capital are able to reform local society in such a way that it aligns with their requirements and demands, yet communities with less social and cultural capital may increasingly face difficulties establishing citizen initiatives to respond to state reforms. Such inequalities could translate into increased marginalisation of those rural communities less well equipped to successfully implement civic initiatives (Uitermark, 2015). The unilateral promotion of endogenous development through self-organisation and voluntarism may therefore not be the best way to create more sustainable rural communities: policies aiming to stimulate innovation and development seem to ignore the structural problems, such as poor access to resources, markets and networks, confronting some rural communities (Bock, 2016). This suggests that the promotion of greater citizen activity only has minimal impact as a tool to ensure the quality of the living environment in rural areas.

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Figure legend:

- Figure 1: Map of the Netherlands, with the province of Friesland in red
- Table 1: Descriptive overview and reliability analysis for liveability factors
- Table 2: Social characteristics of the respondents
- Table 3: Hierarchical regression analysis with total liveability score (dependent variable), satisfaction with liveability determinants and socio demographics as block variables (independent variable)
- Figure 2: Mean scores of the ranking of the seven liveability determinants for different groups of participants
- Table 4: Hierarchical regression analysis with total liveability score (dependent variable) and satisfaction with several liveability determinants and socio demographics as block variables (independent variable)